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Divine Desire: Incarnational Poetics in the Harley Lyrics

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Abstract

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This essay develops a literary-historical and theoretical framework within which to consider the anonymous Middle English penitential lyric “An Old Man’s Prayer,” from British Library MS Harley 2253. Beginning with a review of the methodological problems involved in contextualizing medieval lyrics, I proceed to situate the religious lyrics in relation to the rise of affective devotion to the humanity of Christ in the later Middle Ages. By arguing for the capacity of the genre for aesthetic and conceptual complexity, I seek to establish lyrics as a form of ‘vernacular theology,’ a recently developed critical category in medieval studies from which lyrics have so far been excluded. “An Old Man’s Prayer,” examined in relation to other selected Harley lyrics, serves as the primary textual test case for a hermeneutic which reads for “Incarnational poetics,” that is, the ways in which the claims of orthodox Christology shape and structure the form and thematics of medieval poetry. Emphasizing the centrality of Incarnational doctrine, I contend against the reduction of the essence of medieval Christian worldview to *contemptus mundi*. More specifically, I seek to demonstrate the reconciliation effected by the Incarnation between this-worldly and spiritual desire, between the material and transcendent realms, as represented in “An Old Man’s Prayer” by the speaker’s implicit affective identification with Christ’s passion. Invoking the discourse of desire, I engage the psychoanalytic approach to literary studies, which I find ultimately insufficient for achieving a satisfactory interpretive “fusion of horizons” between medieval texts and current criticism. Thus, I turn to the contemporary theological perspective of John Milbank, whose ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ provides a theoretical basis for an Incarnational hermeneutic.

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Texts and Contexts: Problems of Lyric Interpretation

This essay is primarily concerned with the forty-fifth of the 116 items compiled in the extraordinary fourteenth-century manuscript British Library MS Harley 2253, a Middle English poem titled “An Old Man’s Prayer” by modern editors (Brook #13). The first stanza of the poem reveals the form of the poem as a penitent prayer. The speaker beseeches God to “asoyle” him of sin, forgive his “folies” and deliver him from the “luthere lastes” (base vices) that beset him (lines 6-8). These requests seem to be perfectly straightforward expressions of penitence. However, the opening sentence of the poem presents the reader with a textual and interpretive challenge: “Heze Louerd, þou here my bone, / þat madest middelert ant mone, / ant mon of murþes munne” (1-3).¹ Despite its semantic ambiguity, we may interpret the third line as establishing some perceptual relationship to joy or pleasure as essential to the divinely created nature of humanity.² What all this has to do with an old man’s penitence is not immediately clear. The connection of “murþes” to the expression of God’s will in creation suggest that they are theologically significant, but this significance is not readily apparent.

¹All citations of Harley lyrics are from G.L. Brook, ed., *The Harley Lyrics: The Middle English Lyrics of Ms. Harley 2253* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1948). Brian Stone’s translation renders lines 1-3 as “O God above us, grant my boon, / Maker of middle-earth and moon / and man with mind on bliss” (184).

² “Mon of murþes munne” is a good example of how, as Siegfried Wenzel points out, the use of alliteration in the Harley lyrics tends to produce “semantic obscurity,” a quality which Wenzel cites as evidence of the poems’ aesthetic sophistication, in that it exceeds didactic simplicity of expression (133).

“An Old Man’s Prayer” falls under the modern scholarly generic classification of the ‘Middle-English religious lyric.’ Besides the fact that this very designation is fraught and unstable, many of the poems to which it is typically applied pose a particular critical challenge to scholars in their relative lack of immediately available contexts. Thomas Duncan has suggested several factors that contribute significantly to this problem: first is the anonymity of the “great majority” of these poems, which deprives the reader of the “supportive sense of familiarity” provided by an established authorial canon (xvi). Secondly, in their “brevity,” such poems do not produce their own contexts in the way that a longer text such as *Piers Plowman* or the *Canterbury Tales* is able to do (xvii). Yet another major problem in establishing context is “the probable loss of so much of the original corpus” of early English lyrics (xviii). Thus, the scholar who wishes to deal with an anonymous, relatively short Middle English poem such as “An Old Man’s Prayer” is faced with the task of generating a responsible yet creative critical framework within which to consider the text.³

In the absence of an authorial corpus, the most immediate literary context for a poem is formed by the manuscript(s) in which it appears, specifically by the other texts with which it was read and circulated in its own time. Manuscript context is particularly important with regard to “An Old Man’s Prayer” for two reasons: first, the poem survives uniquely in Harley 2253, and secondly, the composition of the Harley manuscript suggests a discriminating selectivity on the part of its compiler. For critics who are inclined to heed Fredric Jameson’s injunction to “always historicize,” the brevity and

³ Obviously, this is essentially the critic’s task in approaching any text. My point, however, is that the task requires more of the critic in the case of anonymous Middle English lyrics due to their relative lack of *immediately apparent* contexts.

narrowly focused subject matter of religious lyrics poses a particular challenge, since such poems are unlikely to make direct references to specific contemporary events or people. Thus, the task of historical contextualization must be accomplished by considering religious lyrics as particular manifestations of the broader late medieval devotional culture. This essay draws on recent critical developments which have demonstrated the capacity of English vernacular texts for carrying profound theological significance, so that the consideration of the contemporary devotional context of “An Old Man’s Prayer” flows into reflection on the Christian theological tradition generally, in other words from synchronic contextualization to the diachronic concerns of intellectual history. Finally, this essay is concerned with contemporary theoretical approaches to the issues in medieval thought which are present in the poem. My concern with the discourse of desire unsurprisingly involves the considerations of psychoanalytic criticism. However, finding this critical mode ultimately inadequate to my purposes, I eventually turn instead to a contemporary theological perspective in order to achieve a more satisfactory interpretive ‘fusion of horizons’ As a critical and interpretive framework is generated for the consideration of this particular text, each component of this framework, including the manuscript Harley 2253, late medieval devotional culture, Christian theology, and contemporary critical theory, becomes itself an object of concern, so that the critical relationship between foreground and background is continually reversible.⁴

⁴ I am thinking here of Stephen Greenblatt’s application of Clifford Geertz’s term “thick description” (*Practicing New Historicism*, 31). Also relevant is Hans-Georg Gadamer’s formulation in *Truth and Method* of *abheben* or reciprocal foregrounding: i.e. “all foregrounding also makes visible that from which something is foregrounded (304).

Carnal and Incarnate: Opposition or Reconciliation?

Carter Revard has argued strongly that the arrangement of the items that make up Harley MS 2253 reveal a “metanarrative,” a “central ordering principle” according to which the manuscript was compiled, namely “the notion that we know everything by its contrary, so that to know anything we need to look also at its contrary” (107-8). Thus, the dramatic energy of the anthology as a whole is dialectical and oppositional, presenting the reader with “a lively procession of virtue and vice, sensual youth and impotent age, plausible sinners and martyred saints in carnival combat” (96). This view seems to cast a particularly revealing light on the fact that the English ‘lyrics’ of the manuscript deal nearly exclusively with either sacred or earthly love, and Revard’s thesis of deliberate thematic arrangement would seem to be confirmed by the scribe’s placement together of two poems beginning with the line “lutel wot hit any mon,” the first of which goes on to depict, in the words of their editorial titles, “The Way of Christ’s Love,” while the second deals with “The Way of Woman’s Love.” (Brook # 31 and 32).⁵

My project in the following pages bears a very particular relationship to Revard’s thesis. I do not directly address the issue of the possibility of an overall organizational principle for the manuscript, nor do I attempt to interpret the scribe’s compositional

⁵ I do not address here those several English Harley poems excluded from Brook’s anthology which are sometimes called ‘political lyrics,’ a designation which reflects the problematic nature of the term ‘lyric’ in a medieval context.

intentions.⁶ I take it for granted that the poems speak to and reflect upon one another merely by virtue of existing in the relative proximity of the same manuscript. Thus, the identification and interpretation of what Revard calls “verbal echoes” among the poems is central to my argument (110). The aspect of Revard’s argument with which I am most concerned is his view of the manuscript’s dynamic as essentially that of dialectic, particularly between the opposing forces of humanity’s perennial earthly desires, and the ostensibly otherworldly emphasis of Christian ideology. It seems fair to say that, in Revard’s view, the thematic concerns of the Harley scribe reflect the characteristic tensions of the European Middle Ages in general. In the instance of the poems on the two “ways” of love, we might assume that this juxtaposition illustrates the irreconcilability of these options, and that the proper response as dictated by medieval orthodoxy would be to recognize the latter as inferior and reject it in favor of the former. My aim is not so much to overturn this view as to complicate it. If Revard presents us with a Harley manuscript characterized by thesis and antithesis, I seek to demonstrate the presence in the book’s Middle English lyrics of the possibility, if not the fully-realized actuality, of synthesis. This essay then is an exploration of how the lyrics of the Harley manuscript, as Daniel Birkholz succinctly puts it, “reconcile the realms of the carnal and incarnate” (228). Birkholz’s phrase evokes the Incarnation, and it is precisely through the lens of this essential Christian doctrine that such reconciliation may be realized. By looking at “An Old Man’s Prayer” and other Harley lyrics in light of a contemporary theological exposition of Incarnational meaning we may see that the possible synthesis of material

⁶ I tend to agree with Theo Stemmler that, though the manuscript is an anthology, Revard’s thesis is an overstatement of its intentional organization.

and spiritual desire is not the heterodox speculation of a few poems but is instead implicit in the dogmatic claims of Christian orthodoxy itself.

Demonstrating the possibility of this synthesis is seriously complicated by the genuine power of the concept of *contemptus mundi* and the accompanying ascetic ideal in the Middle Ages, which together inform a perspective through which the love-longing of the secular Harley lyrics can appear futile at best and damning at worst. Nevertheless, to accept *contemptus mundi* as a totalizing rubric for understanding medieval belief, even orthodox belief, is unjustifiably reductive. Thus, though she describes a medieval theology dominated by Platonic disdain for the particulars of creation, Philippa Tristram points out that we should avoid “the notion of monolithic, unalterable unity” in the medieval religious worldview (2-3). Likewise, Douglas Gray reminds us that “the extreme ascetic insistence on the fact of decay” characteristic of *contemptus mundi* “is in fact an exaggeration of one aspect of the Christian tradition” (180). As Shulamith Shahar explains, “the body’s partial rehabilitation was justified by its divine creation, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the belief in the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day” (36). Shahar’s qualifying adjective demonstrates the strength of *contemptus mundi*, but his statement also illustrates that the central doctrines of Christianity allow for and perhaps enjoin a redemptive vision of material existence.

The aspect of the Christian tradition that can serve to counterbalance the distortion of *contemptus mundi* is suggested by the devotional and theological turn in the later Middle Ages towards a focus on the humanity of Christ, particularly in his passion.⁷ Critics and historians often identify the roots of this shift in emphasis in Anselm of

⁷ On the broader cultural effects of this shift, see Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body:*

Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Canterbury's reworking of the doctrine of the Atonement in *Cur Deus Homo*, in which he focuses on "Christ, out of love for man, becoming man to suffer death on the cross for man's salvation," rather than on Christ's cosmic victory over Satan, death, and sin (Duncan xiv).⁸ Another source for 'Incarnational' devotion is the prominence given to Christ's humbling himself by taking on human nature in Franciscan spirituality, particularly as expressed in the thought of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁹ In her magisterial work on Middle English religious lyrics, Rosemary Woolf describes the renewed focus on God's desire for reconciliation with humanity as expressed by the Incarnation and the "corresponding emphasis upon the value of man's natural feelings, that is upon what St. Bernard... described as carnal love in order to distinguish it from spiritual love." For St. Bernard, it is precisely the incarnation of God that validates natural or carnal love, since he "became man in order to gain it" (22). Woolf goes on to demonstrate the value of this theological shift for poetry: a particular "literary advantage of the theory of carnal love was that all human relationships could be a source of appropriate imagery" (24).

Lyric poems, particularly ones which take Christ's passion as their subject, play an important role in the affective piety of the later Middle Ages. In order to understand this role, we must consider the distinctive qualities of 'lyric voice' in medieval poems. According to Duncan, "it is essential that expectations generated by the nineteenth-century notion of a lyric, defined by the OED in Ruskin's words as 'the expression of the poet of his own feelings,' should be set aside" (xxi). Woolf points out that the term 'lyric' itself was not known to medieval writers, who instead refer to lyrics as prayers or

⁸ Interestingly, Harley 2253 contains an excerpt from Anselm's "questions to the dying" (fol. 137).

⁹ See David L. Jeffrey, *The Early English Lyric and Franciscan Spirituality*.

meditations (1). Rather than verbal acts of personal expression, Middle English lyrics are “essentially public events operating within and through well recognized conventions” according to Duncan. This ‘public’ orientation works in a particular way in “devotional” or “religious” lyrics, which typically feature “a voice with which every reader may readily identify” (xxiii). Sarah Stanbury concurs with Duncan that, in contrast to conventional modern understandings of lyric, “the single and private utterance in these lyrics has a distinctly public, and even narrative, dimension” (228).¹⁰ The lyric’s potential for readerly identification may be what Douglas Gray is getting at when he says that the religious lyrics evince a “poetic stance which cannot be accurately described either as ‘personal’ or as ‘impersonal’” (60). The ‘I’ of the typical devotional lyric is not to be understood as the individual voice of the author or as a distinct persona, but rather as a subjectivity which the reader is invited to inhabit. In the case of lyrics on the passion this subjectivity enables the reader to affectively identify with the physical sufferings of Jesus or the grief of the Virgin Mary, while in the penitential mode of lyric the reader may take the speaker’s godly remorse as a model.¹¹ As I will argue below, “An Old Man’s Prayer” exemplifies a subtle form of affective identification which complicates the question of medieval lyric subjectivity.

¹⁰ This ‘public’ dimension is demonstrated by the shift to the first-person plural at the end of the majority of Harley religious lyrics, including “An Old Man’s Prayer” (Brook #2, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22, 26, 27, 31).

¹¹ Sarah McNamer describes devotional lyrics as “scripts for the performance of feeling” in *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (12).

The general emphasis on what Gray calls the “functional and practical” religious purpose of devotional lyrics has encouraged critics to underestimate, if not deny entirely, their capacity for theological and aesthetic complexity (37). Gray scrupulously avoids ascribing consciously ‘literary’ concerns to the authors of religious lyrics and insists that the poems were made to be used, rather than admired. David L. Jeffrey claims that, in contrast to the English religious poetry of the seventeenth century,

the medieval English religious lyric is seldom so intellectual, is more often physical than metaphysical, immediate than reflective, roughly simple than elaborately careful. It is usually characterized by emotion rather than thought, by force of style rather than by elaboration of argument, and by a dramatic movement toward radical identification of the “subject” with the object of the poem. (2)¹²

Thus, devotional lyrics are often characterized as solely concerned with effecting affective piety in their readers.¹³ Similarly, Vincent Gillespie remarks on the

¹² Similarly, Woolf compares and contrasts Middle English religious lyrics with seventeenth-century ‘metaphysical’ poetry at some length.

¹³ Michael Kuczynski suggests that “the liveliness of the theology in these poems is lost on modern critics, who not only denigrate the religious lyrics by interpreting them as conduits for orthodox (hence unexciting) doctrine, but further confuse the doctrinal with the doctrinaire. The vocabulary of lyrics criticism describes these Middle English poems routinely as ‘moral,’ ‘devotional,’ or ‘didactic’ in tone, categories of statement that are either too practical or boring to include anything theologically investigative or speculative” (2011, 329).

“unashamedly pragmatic moral strategy at the core” of penitential lyrics such as *An Old Man’s Prayer*, in which the speaker’s plight mainly serves to remind readers of the “applicability of the core catechetic teachings of the church” to their own lives (77-8).¹⁴ In contrast to the generally dismissive critical attitude towards Middle English religious lyrics, my argument in the following pages approaches “An Old Man’s Prayer” as a test case for the development of a hermeneutic which reveals the capacity of the form for aesthetic and theological sophistication alongside its more readily apparent qualities of affective power and didactic instruction. In turn, this hermeneutic illuminates the conceptual relationship between spiritual and material desire in medieval texts.

¹⁴ It is important to note, however, that penitential *lyrics* are not merely didactic texts, but also depend on evoking the emotions that enable proper penance.

Lyric Does Theology: Incarnational Poetics and Hermeneutics

In order to adequately recognize the potential of religious lyrics for theological complexity, it is helpful to consider their broader cultural context, namely their participation in the late-medieval matrix of affective devotion, lay piety, and the phenomenon which scholars have come to call ‘vernacular theology.’¹⁵ Nicholas Watson, while he did not invent this term, has been influential in challenging the critical tendency toward binaristic thinking in which the affective emphasis of many vernacular devotional works is opposed to the intellectual and contemplative quality of Latinate, clerical theology. The encouragement of unlearned lay piety in the form of emotional identification with the human suffering of Christ rather than the contemplation of the mystery of his deity is seen as a way in which the potential for doctrinal disturbance could be limited by the educated clerical hierarchy.

In fairness, this view is precisely that articulated in one of the most popular vernacular devotional works of the early fifteenth century, Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, in which Love argues that the contemplative activity of the unlearned laity cannot and should not go beyond meditation on Christ’s humanity in his passion.¹⁶ In light of Love’s views, it might seem that critics are justified in dismissing

¹⁵ See Vincent Gillespie’s chapter on this topic in Paul Strohm, ed., *Middle English* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 401-20).

¹⁶ Michelle Karnes points out that Love’s view is not necessarily normative, tracing an impressive theological genealogy including Bonaventure and Aquinas in which imaginative meditation on Christ’s humanity is seen as the means of theological contemplation, rather than as a deflection of such contemplation.

the potential of the vernacular as a vehicle for theological speculation. Watson, however, seeks to trouble this overly simplistic view, arguing that vernacular theological texts such as *Piers Plowman* and Julian of Norwich's *Revelations* produce a sophisticated Incarnational theology of their own which engages meaningfully with the paradoxes and tensions inherent in the doctrine since its earliest inception. Rather than constituting Christ's humanity as a concealing veil which can protect laity from dangerous theological speculations for which they are unfit, these texts represent Christ's incarnation as itself the ultimate revelation of God's nature. Thus the theological potential of the vernacular is validated through its association with Christ's humanity.

Watson's analysis suggests that the 'Incarnational turn' of the later Middle Ages was a multivalent phenomenon involving serious doctrinal considerations as well as affective devotion. Jim Rhodes substantiates this suggestion by tracing a theological genealogy which is not only in tension with the otherworldly focus of "the dominant Augustinian or Neoplatonic view" but distinct from an Anselmian focus on the crucified Jesus as the perfect human sacrifice (19). Anselm had argued that the only reason for the Incarnation was that humanity's salvation could not be accomplished any other way. In contrast, a number of medieval theologians, including Peter Abelard, John Duns Scotus, and Robert Grosseteste, argued that Christ would have been incarnated even if humanity had not fallen. Rhodes demonstrates that for these thinkers, as for Thomas Aquinas, the uniting of human and divine in the Incarnation itself affirms and restores the original dignity of human nature and physical creation (46). He further argues that this positive theological valuation of earthly life and the body is emphasized and developed in distinctive ways in fourteenth-century English literature.

Neither Rhodes nor Watson deals explicitly with lyrics. Nevertheless, religious lyrics are clearly implicated in the culture of lay piety and vernacular devotion

which Watson addresses. Rhodes, on the other hand, while arguing that poetry ‘does’ theology, is greatly concerned with the autonomy of poetry as a discourse distinct from theology per se. Thus, when he refers to “simple but effective--and affecting--devotional and meditative verse” which “is scarcely distinguishable from theology,” Rhodes seems to imply that such verse does not possess the aesthetic sophistication and concomitant freedom for theological speculation found in the narrative poetry of Langland, Chaucer, and the *Pearl*-poet. For Rhodes, religious lyrics and other devotional texts are definitely theology in some limited sense, but not necessarily ‘poetry’.

Obviously, not all religious lyrics are created equal. As Gray points out, even if medieval lyric poets are not motivated by autonomous aesthetic considerations, “it would be wrong to deny to the authors of many [religious lyrics] a developed aesthetic sense” (70). Siegfried Wenzel’s work demonstrates that many religious lyrics are actually developed from sermon tags, in which rhyming verse is used to organize homilies, as well as to punctuate, illustrate and aid memory of religious truths, Wenzel pointedly distinguishes the poems of Harley 2253 in particular as not only not meant for use in sermons, but as clearly aesthetically superior to merely instrumental verses (133). Furthermore, the lyrics of Harley 2253 share their manuscript with multiple texts which are purely didactic or devotional, including, for example, item 105, a Latin “Prayer before confession” (fol. 135). With such distinctions in mind, the critic is encouraged to take full account of the lyrics’ formal characteristics, which in turn aids critical sensitivity to their potential for conceptual complexity.

As I will argue below, “An Old Man’s Prayer” is particularly sophisticated in ways which are atypical of the religious lyric genre and which have not been addressed by other critics. Indeed, it might seem as though the foregoing discussion of affective piety in the lyric is beside the point, since “An Old Man’s Prayer” is not a passion poem

and, in fact, the human Christ does not explicitly appear at all in the lyric. While the poem might be seen as a morally didactic, it does not, at least on the surface, engage in the intense theological probing of a text like *Piers Plowman*. Nevertheless, I will argue that the poem does indeed work as vernacular theology, drawing on Cristina Maria Cervone's recent formulation of 'Incarnational poetics.' According to Cervone, "an Incarnational poetic suffuses a work by manifesting itself in underlying structures, grounding the work as a whole in Incarnation theology while not focusing attention directly or primarily on the Incarnation itself" (17). Thus, Cervone unites formal with conceptual considerations, illuminating the connection between aesthetic sophistication and theological complexity. Reading for an Incarnational poetic also demands an acute sensitivity to the full range of signifying potential borne by the most basic units of poetic meaning: "the potency of a 'full word' lies in the off-the-page process by which a reader mulls over the resonance of words or imagistic patterns and ponders referents that point away from local contexts even while signifying within them" (159-60). Cervone's attention to maximum significance of individual words makes her formulation equally applicable to lyrics as to longer narrative poetry. My analysis of the text of "An Old Man's Prayer" hinges upon reading in this expansive way particular Middle English words, especially 'bote' and 'purhsot' (meaning 'remedy' and 'pierced-through,' respectively). My reading does indeed move beyond the 'local' context of the poem itself, but it also explores the resonance of certain words with reference to their use in other Harley lyrics, in a process which is not so much off-the-page as turn-the-page. Nevertheless, the extra-textual theological and historical context I have traced provides essential support for discerning the underlying structures of an Incarnational poetic at work. While, in my reading, "An Old Man's Prayer" invites meditation in the theological vein traced by Rhodes, in which Christ's Incarnation is the recapitulation and recovery of genuine human nature and

creation, it also exists in continuity with the Anselmian affectivity which was so central to late-medieval lay piety. The concept of affective identification as an underlying structure for “An Old Man’s Prayer” is essential for the task of recovering the poem’s full theological resonance. As Gray points out, “it would be misleading to separate ‘affective’ and ‘theological’ traditions completely” (68). This is because, as Watson’s work shows, Christian orthodoxy does not allow for a radical division between Christ’s human and divine natures, so that even ‘affective’ devotion to the humanity of Jesus cannot avoid the implications of his divinity, and vice versa.¹⁷

The foregoing critical framework evinces a largely historicist methodology. However, the consideration of theological concepts in relation to literary hermeneutics clearly threatens to exceed the boundaries of a strictly historicist approach. Indeed, my critical purposes here are informed by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s formulation of the “fusion of horizons”:

Projecting a historical horizon... is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs -- which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. (305-6)

Gadamer’s point is that a historically responsible hermeneutic does not entail an attempt to inhabit a hermetically sealed thought-realm of the past in order to avoid the contamination of current prejudices. Instead, our critical recognition of the inevitable

¹⁷ For instance, though the “louerd” of “An Old Man’s Prayer” is not explicitly named as Christ, the speaker’s resolution to fall at his lord’s “fote” evokes the physical embodiment of the deity (102).

“tension between the text and the present” should ultimately lead to the recognition of some underlying continuity in which our contemporary perspective elucidates meanings which may not have been apparent in the immediate historical context of a text. As stated above, I am not only concerned with establishing the conceptual milieu of the poems of Harley 2253, but also with contemporary theoretical approaches to medieval thought. As the phrase “mon of murþes munne” suggests, desire is central to the speaker’s persona in “An Old Man’s Prayer.” Understandably, psychoanalytic criticism has played a major role in recent theoretical engagement with the topic of desire in medieval culture. Particularly relevant to my purposes is L.O. Aranye Fradenburg’s identification of *contemptus mundi* with the death drive in her seminal work, *Sacrifice Your Love*. While Fradenburg’s treatment of medieval desire is in many ways insightful, in her attempted assimilation of theology to Lacanian concepts she not so much fails to properly historicize as she neglects to take sufficient account of the actual content and implications of Christian theological claims, as I will demonstrate in the concluding section of this essay. In response to these problems of psychoanalysis, I turn to contemporary theology. John Milbank is a prominent voice in Radical Orthodoxy, an academic theological movement emanating from Cambridge University and dedicated to engaging modern critical theory with the resources of patristic and medieval Christian thought. Certain crucial points of my reading of “An Old Man’s Prayer” are informed by Milbank’s essay on “Christological Poetics,” which provides an intensive theoretical basis for the centrality and significance of the figure of Christ for the making of human meaning.

“Myn gomenes waxep gelde”: Aging and Desire

Given my overarching theoretical concerns, there are several reasons for focusing on “An Old Man’s Prayer” as my primary textual site of inquiry. Firstly, it presents a unique intersection of the various oppositional elements listed by Revard: it features a “plausible sinner” gripped by the debilitation of aging but remembering his sensual youth who also reflects on the conflict of virtue and vice in his life. The poem is formally sophisticated in the ways I have identified as conducive to conceptual complexity: it is structured by twelve alternating stanzas of twelve and five lines (with two five-line stanzas at the end), with the rhyme scheme of *aabaabccbccb dedde*, and features alliteration in every line, as well as alliterative concatenations linking each stanza to the next. Furthermore, because the old man is struggling with the imminent approach of death, the poem yields a particularly apt opportunity to address the issue of *contemptus mundi*. Finally, by examining the poem in the context of other English lyrics in Harley 2253 and late-medieval affective piety, with an eye toward Cervone’s “deep structures,” we may discern an implicit identification of the old man’s plight with Christ’s passion, which opens up fresh possibilities for interpreting the relationship between earthly and heavenly, temporal and spiritual, secular and sacred in the manuscript. Finally, I believe the poem’s complexity and significance have not been sufficiently acknowledged or discussed.

It is easy to see how “An Old Man’s Prayer” might be construed as a fairly straightforward expression of typically medieval penitence and *contemptus mundi*. The poem’s speaker can be seen as an appropriate counterpoint to the lusty gallants of the Harley love lyrics, his penitence as proper to his “wintry” season of life as opposed to

their youthful “spring.”¹⁸ While the love-stricken speaker in “The Lover’s Complaint” desperately seeks the “bote” or remedy of erotic favor (fol. 63v, Brook #5.9), the old man, beset by gout and “monye eueles mo” (many other evils) and unable to find “whet bote is best” (24-6), beseeches God to send him the remedy of death, the cessation of suffering coupled with the negation of earthly desire. This view seems to be confirmed when the old man asks God to “stunt” his life” (94), and when he sounds a note of resignation in the last stanza: “Nou icham to deþ ydyht, / ydon is al my dede” (now I am prepared for death / all my deeds are done) (103-4). However, I contend that death-as-cessation cannot adequately fill the role of the remedy sought in “An Old Man’s Prayer,” and that within the poem itself the “bote” is actually identified as something else entirely. Similarly, I argue that desire is not genuinely abjured by the speaker in the poem, but that both spiritual and earthly desire remain central to his persona.

The continuance of earthly desire can be demonstrated by examining the old man’s depiction of his supposedly misspent youth. In the seventh stanza, he describes a period of his life when he lived in a metaphorical community of vice, in which he was variously related to particular personifications of the seven deadly sins (with dishonesty apparently replacing greed). As Rosemary Woolf points out, the confession of the seven deadly sins by the speaker is a conventional feature of medieval didactic religious poems.

¹⁸ The old man is certainly aligned with the imagery of winter when he says that his pleasures “waxeþ gelde” (line 43), a phrase which links his prayer to “A Winter Song,” where the “leues waxeþ bare” (fol. 75v, Brook #17.2), a similar instance of the paradox of ‘waxing’ barrenness, so that these two poems stand in contrast to the various other versions ‘waxing’ in the manuscript’s English lyrics.

The personifications are striking: the speaker had Gluttony as his “glemon” or minstrel and Lechery as his “lauendere” or laundress. Ultimately, though, the sentiment expressed here seems typically penitential, as are the old man’s subsequent lament that he did not heed “Godes heste” (commands) but rather worked “euer azeyn (against) is wille” and his promise that he will “bowen... to bete” or submit to moral amendment (75-6, 71). These sentiments are in line with the speaker’s request that God “asoyle” him of sin in the opening stanza of the poem (6). However, in its depiction of the personal history of a particular individual, “An Old Man’s Prayer” is atypical of the medieval religious lyric genre, which, as we have seen, is characterized by what Woolf calls the “abnegation of individuality” (6). Between the first and seventh stanzas, the speaker relates in significant detail a series of contrasts between his youth and his current state of decline, which is conceived in both social and physical terms. The old man laments that he is considered by others to be useless and burdensome, called a “fulle-flet” (one who fills the floor) and “waynoun wayteglede” (glede = coal), good for nothing but watching the embers dying in the hearth, an image which itself evokes the fading light of the speaker’s life (16-17). It seems that the speaker in this poem sits almost literally, in the words of a medieval Latin antiphon, *in umbra mortis*, in the shadow of death.

The physical and social distress of aging is made all the more acute by the fact that his past was markedly different. While once he was esteemed “with the heste”

(noblest) in the “bour” of courtly dalliance, now he “may no fynger folde” (19-21)¹⁹ As a young man, he was apparently successful in matters of love, but he is now “lutel loved and lasse ytolde,” little loved and less esteemed (22-23). This focus on perception and reception by others exemplifies what Kathleen Woodward calls the mirror stage of old age. According to Woodward, the recognition that one is old is constituted by the response of others to the subject. In contrast to the “binary opposition” of the mirror stage of infancy, the mirror stage of old age “is inherently triangular, involving the gaze of the Other as well as two images of oneself” (111).²⁰ In addition to one’s perception by others, Woodward notes that “the knowledge of old age can come to us from our infirmities” (109). Once the speaker of “An Old Man’s Prayer” was “wilde as the ro” (deer), a sprightly creature at home in nature and the body, but now physical degeneration, particularly gout, “siweth [him] so faste” (pursues closely) that he must leave off, not due to altered inclination but to actual inability (27-29). Social and physical decline are neatly united in the short stanza beginning at line thirty. The fact that the speaker once rode “on horse heh / ant werede worly wede” (wore splendid clothes) aligns him with aristocratic culture, but now a “staf” is his only “stede.” The speaker goes on to point out that the very sight of “steden stythe in stalle” (strong horses in the stalls)

¹⁹ The erotic significance of this figure of speech is illuminated by the love lyric which immediately follows “The Old Man’s Prayer” in the manuscript, “Blow Northerne Wynd,” where the speaker’s *blazon* of his beloved includes the attribute of “fyngres feyre forte folde” (fol. 72v, Brook #14.29).

²⁰ The old man clearly possesses “two images” of himself, as shown by the repeated contrasts between the vitality of his youth and his current state of debilitation.

painfully accentuates the fact that, rather than riding out on the hunt, he must wander “haltinde (limping) in the halle” (30-35)²¹

In this part of the poem, the old man’s characterization of his youth is not only not condemnatory, it is wholly positive. His tone when describing his youth is more elegiac than penitential, and indeed, his sense of social isolation is not unlike that of the classic Old English elegy, “The Wanderer.” However, it seems that even more painful for the old man than the loss of social status is his exclusion from erotic activity: “Pat er wes wildest inwip walle / nou is vnder fote yfalle / ant mey no fynger felde” (he that was once wildest within walls is now fallen underfoot and may fold no fingers) (38-40). The speaker’s return to the finger-folding of line twenty-one could be interpreted as formulaic laziness on the poet’s part, or as an artful simulation of an old man’s forgetfully circuitous rambling, but an at least equally plausible interpretation is that the speaker is yearningly lingering on a physical detail of the erotic play in which he may no longer take part. The old man’s exclusion from sexual involvement is not due to physical incapacity (as with horse-riding), but to social restriction. Whatever finger-folding may entail, it is apparently no longer age-appropriate for the old man, despite the fact that he might still desire it. He has been displaced from finger to foot, just as he has been brought down from horse to floor. However, in this case, desire has not been dissolved by its social proscription. In his combination of penitence and libidinal desire, the old man both fulfills and resists the prescriptive norms of old age in the medieval period. As Shahar points out, for many medieval writers, old age was properly seen as “an opportunity and a means of attaining a spiritual elevation and atonement for sins” (56). In his penitence, the

²¹ Later in the poem the speaker implies that he was not himself a lord but a retainer (“hirmon”) and head-huntsman (heued-hount) (84-5).

speaker of “An Old Man’s Prayer” seems determined to take advantage of this opportunity. However, Shahar goes on to note that “the chief sin and foolishness of an old man... was to keep seeking carnal relations.” While the old man may not be actively pursuing such relations, he does keep the desire for them alive through memory, and, according to Shahar, even the “wish for live in old age” was denounced (77).

However, to reduce the old man’s continuing libidinal desire to the supposedly unseemly lingering of sexual appetite would be to neglect the complexity of his elegiac longing.²² Michael Franklin argues that, while the ‘finger folding’ in the Harley lyrics carries “definite sensual significance,” there is also “a strong probability that this phrase bore connotations of the ceremony of ‘trothplight,’ which was also known as ‘hand fasting’” (176). Franklin links ‘finger-folding’ to the phrase ‘to have and to hold’ from the wedding liturgy of the period, which “expresses a mutual desire for a loving, binding, and permanent relationship” (179). In light of this connection, the old man’s exclusion from ‘finger-folding’ may be seen as not merely the loss of sexual pleasure *per se*, but of companionship as well. While Franklin only addresses the companionship of marriage, plighting one’s troth has a broader significance which could include feudal bonds between lord and retainer. John Scattergood has suggested that “An Old Man’s Prayer” illustrates the predicament of an aging indentured retainer in the system of “bastard

²² As David Gray points out, in penitential lyrics it is actually “rather difficult to exclude complexity of emotion or an elegiac tone altogether. Any rehearsal of the vanished or transient joys of life... may, whether ‘intentionally’ or not, develop a nostalgic or melancholy tone. Poets of stature have minds comprehensive enough to allow a variety of tone and conflicting emotions to exist” (183).

feudalism,” in which a servant was contractually “bound by a written indenture to serve a lord for life in peace and war at specific times and under specific conditions,” rather than being a permanent member of the lord’s household (17-18). Since the old man is no longer able to provide useful service, and since his ‘lord’ has no genuine feudal obligation to him, he becomes something of a social pariah (22-3). Thus while he was once the “beneficiary” of bastard feudalism, he is now “its victim” (26). However, the phenomenon of bastard feudalism is seen by most scholars as arising in the aftermath of the Black Plague, and the contents of Harley 2253 were compiled in the first half of the fourteenth century. The old man’s unenviable situation can be understood as the result of aging within the regular feudal system. While he may be incapable of providing any useful service, he is still taking up space in the “halle” (35). Given these considerations, the old man’s insistent yearning for ‘finger-folding’ can be seen to signify the loss of status and social bonds as well as the more immediate sense of erotic enjoyment.

At first blush, it seems sensible enough to consider the line which initiates the ‘elegiac’ tone of the first half of the poem, “Whil ich wes in wille wolde” (while I was in the power of will/desire) (20), to be essentially synonymous with the line which begins the more “penitential” second half, “Whil mi lif wes luper ant lees” (base and false) (52). Taking this view, one might identify the speaker’s youthful finger-folding with lechery, his wearing of splendid clothes with pride, and regard his gout as sure evidence of gluttony. However, there are several reasons we should resist such automatic identifications. First, the sections are not thematically symmetrical: there is nothing in the first portion which could be construed as evidence of envy, wrath, sloth, or guile, all of which the speaker claims to be guilty of in the seventh stanza. So even if both sections describe the same period of the speaker’s life, it is unlikely that they are simply describing the same aspect of his life (i.e. sinfulness) in different modes. Furthermore,

within the context of the elegiac segment of the poem, finger-folding and finery are simply not presented as intrinsically sinful. Rather, these pleasures (“gomenes”) are likely synonymous with the “godes” which now elude the old man (42-3). Therefore, to argue that the old man is characterizing the youthful pleasures described in the elegiac segment of the poem as inherently evil requires an evacuated sense of “goods” which is unwarranted by the text. In light of these considerations, the best understanding of the relationship between the two portions is that they describe two distinct aspects of the speaker’s life, youthful pleasures and sins, which are likely concurrent and may very well overlap, but are not synonymous.

“Whet ys þe beste bote”: Remedy and Reconciliation

I am not alone in seeing something other than straightforward renunciation and repentance in “An Old Man’s Prayer.” In the introduction to his modern English translation of selected Harley lyrics, Brian Stone claims that the old man “though formally repenting the sins of his courtly youth, seems to long for death not so much because it will bring him sight of the saints, as because he cannot bear life without the joys of the castle.” For Stone, the poem displays “only the colouring of orthodoxy,” noting also that “it is not orthodox to pray for death” (177). Similarly, Michael Kuczynski rather dismissively characterizes the poem as “a satiric prayer delivered in the persona of an old man, suffering from gout” (2000, 160). It seems that these critics, on finding the poem to be something other than a pure expression of penitent *contemptus mundi*, do not consider the possibility that it may yet depict or constitute a serious engagement with the divine.

The speaker’s apparent request for death has already been considered, and now I will examine other elements of the poem which complicate the notion that this request is the distilled essence of the speaker’s relation to the divine. The poem itself opens with a direct appeal to God to hear the old man’s prayer. In the opening lines already quoted at the beginning of this essay, the speaker emphasizes God’s power as creator of the cosmos and humanity: “þat madest middelert ant mone / ant mon of murpes monne,” and goes on to characterize him as a righteous and faithful ruler, a “trusti kyng and trewe in trone” (2-4). The speaker’s request for absolution has already been addressed, but the preceding line, in which he prays that God will be “sahte sone” (reconciled soon) with him, indicates that he desires reconciliation with the divine, not simply justification of his sin (5). The poem’s placement in the Harley manuscript also casts an interesting light upon the speaker’s spiritual desire. As Theo Stemmler notes, “An Old Man’s Prayer” is

grouped in the manuscript with three other English poems due to metrical similarities that “are so striking that common authorship may be supposed” (117). One of these poems is a retelling of Christ’s parable of the laborers in the vineyard, in which those hired at the ‘eleventh hour’ receive the same wage as those who have worked all day (fol. 70v, Brook #10). As J.A. Burrow points out, medieval interpreters often compared “the ages of man to the hours at which the labourers were called into the vineyard,” so the parable was taken to illustrate the principle that it is possible to begin serving God at any stage of life (60). This suggests that the speaker in “An Old Man’s Prayer” may see himself as an ‘eleventh-hour laborer’ in Christ’s vineyard.²³

Reconciliation is further evoked when God’s aspect as creator is accentuated again in the poem’s penultimate stanza, this time connected to God’s redemptive aspect and the answer to the question of the best remedy for the speaker’s suffering, itself in the form of a rhetorical question:

whet ys þe best bote
 bote heryen him þat haht vs boht,
 vre Lord þat al þis world haþ wroht,
 ant fallen him to fote? (lines 99-102).

In this stanza, the remedy sought by the old man is explicitly identified, not as death or even as heavenly bliss, but as being in right relation to God as both creator and, through Christ, redeemer of mankind. When one has fallen underfoot, the solution is to fall at the feet of Christ.

²³ J.A. Barrow delineates the allegorical connections between the parable of the vineyard, the canonical hours, and the ages of man in *The Ages of Man*, 59-62.

According to John Duns Scotus, the Incarnation “was envisioned as medicine against the fall, just as a physician first willed the health of a man before choosing the medicine for curing him” (quoted in Rhodes, 46). The emphasis on reconciliation and remedy in the “An Old Man’s Prayer” indicates a conception of salvation which is not merely legalistic (focused on absolution), but therapeutic.²⁴ If the old man sees God as granter of death, he also beseeches God to grant him life and light (67, 105). The concept of right relation to Christ as the therapeutic remedy for humanity is not limited in the Harley lyrics to “An Old Man’s Prayer.” In the praise lyric “Sute Iesu, King of Blyse,” Christ is the speaker’s “huerte bote” (fol. 75, Brook #15.9), while the penitent speaker in “God ꝑat Al ȝis Myhtes May” (fol. 106, Brook #29), though “vnbold” to “bidde (ask) ꝑe bote” (41), musters up the courage to cry “Iesu Crist, ꝑou be mi bote” (47). Interestingly, another term for remedy appears in “An Autumn Song” (fol. 80, Brook #23): the word “medicine” is used twice to denote the special gift of Mary, the locus of the Incarnation.²⁵ The restoration that comes from right relation to Christ is expressed in other ways: in “The Way of Christ’s Love” the speaker declares “ȝe loue of him vs haue ꝑymaked sounde,” the love of Christ has made humanity whole (5). The concept is also

²⁴ According to Rhodes, Duns Scotus “assigns a purpose to human life other than the gaining of salvation” (46). However, Rhodes unnecessarily restricts ‘salvation’ to a juridical concept. In the broadest sense, salvation may refer to the ultimate fulfillment of the divine purpose for humanity.

²⁵ Brook glosses both “bote” and “medicine” as “remedy,” but it seems that the former term carries a sense of assured efficacy, while the second implies potential aid. This distinction would be appropriate, given the respective roles of Christ and Mary

extended to the cosmos itself in “God þat Al þis Myhtes May,” where the purpose of the Incarnation is “al *þis world* to forþren ant fylle,” or benefit and make perfect (emphasis added) (18).²⁶ Similarly, the rhyme of “boht” with “wroht” in lines 100-101 of “An Old Man’s Prayer” reveals the closeness between God’s creative and redemptive works, since both are acts of pure grace and expressions of divine love.²⁷ The purpose of the Incarnation, and indeed of the Passion, was not to provide humanity with a transcendental escape from the evils of material existence, but to restore and fulfill the original glory and plenitude of the created order.

This is not to say that the Harley lyrics collectively present a wholly positive vision of earthly existence.²⁸ What I do wish to suggest is that “An Old Man’s Prayer” and “The Lover’s Complaint” are not opposites in a Revardian dialectic. A better candidate to set in opposition to “An Old Man’s Prayer” is the poem in the manuscript which is superficially most similar, “Le Regret de Maximian,” an English paraphrase of an ‘elegy’ by the Latin poet of late antiquity and contemporary of Boethius, Maximianus

²⁶ Desire for this fulfillment is attributed to the cosmos itself by St. Paul. See Romans 8:22.

²⁷ Robert Grosseteste, who saw the Incarnation primarily in terms of the fulfillment of creation, firmly rejected the classical notion of an eternal material universe and “insist[ed] on the necessity of creation *ex nihilo*” (Rhodes 48)

²⁸ “The Three Foes of Man” in particular is a straightforward expression of a strong and comprehensive *contemptus mundi* (fol. 62v, Brook #2).

(fol. 82).²⁹ Like “An Old Man’s Prayer,” this poem features an aging speaker who catalogues his lost pleasures of erotic dalliance, physical strength and beauty, pride in social status, friendship, and hunting. Moreover, Maximian also questions heaven as to the reason for his suffering. However, unlike the speaker in “An Old Man’s Prayer,” Maximian explicitly states a desire for death at the end of the poem’s penultimate stanza: “Me were leuere (rather) deed, / Þen þus aliue to bee” (260-1). He then goes even further, beginning the final stanza with the lines “Iich may seien alas, / Þat ich I-boren was; / I-liued ich have to longe” (262-4). Despite Maximian’s repeated appeals to Christ, the sentiments he expresses at the end of the poem are clearly heterodox in their bitter failure to acknowledge the providential will of God. The expression of these sentiments in this poem places their conspicuous absence in “An Old Man’s Prayer” in perspective. As Woolf puts it, “whereas the speaker of ‘Heze loverd’ provides a model for imitation, ‘Maximian’ provides an example of rebellion” (105).

²⁹ This poem is not typically viewed as a ‘Harley lyric’ and is absent from Brook’s collection. I refer to the version of the text found in MS Digby 86, as published in Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1932).

“Sides purhsoht”: Incarnational Identifications

“An Old Man’s Prayer” is unusual among the Harley manuscript’s religious lyrics in that it does not explicitly address Christ’s passion. Thus, the claim that the poem exhibits Incarnational poetics by enacting an affective identification of the speaker with Christ’s passion requires some demonstration. The key to this identification is the old man’s references to the state of his heart. He tells the reader that, when he sees the horses that he may no longer ride, his “huerte gynneþ to helde,” his heart begins to sink. (37). In the next stanza, the hard pursuit of the evils of age makes it seem as if his “herte brekep atuo” (breaks in two) (49). Finally, following contemplation of his past sins, his “sides” are “purhsoht” (pierced-through) by “serewe” (78). Obviously, on the first level, these references describe the speaker’s emotional response to the memory of youthful pleasures, his current debilitated state, and his failure to relate properly to the divine. Beyond that, the specific language of these lines evokes the weakened state of the old man’s physical heart, perhaps even suggesting the possibility of a heart-attack. Finally, it is hard to imagine that the mind of a medieval reader would not be inevitably drawn to Christ’s passion by a specific reference to pierced sides, especially in the context of penitence.

This association is strengthened when “An Old Man’s Prayer” is considered in the context of the Harley manuscript’s other English religious lyrics, which are replete with references to both the wounded heart of Christ as crucial to his redemptive work and the human heart as the essential element of an appropriate response to the passion. The heart is the central image of “Suete Iesu, King of Blysse” (fol. 75, Brook #15). In addition to being described as the “bote” or remedy of the speaker’s heart, Christ is also the heart’s joy, light, and “gleem” (2, 5, 13). Christ has also set the root of his love in the speaker’s heart (10), and the speaker implores that his “herte mote fonde / hou suete bueth thi loue-

bonde” (23-4). Finally, Christ is identified as the speaker’s heart itself, and the speaker asks Christ to “vndo myn herte ant liht theryn” (26-7). These abundant references to the human heart lend a particular poignancy to the later lines, “Suete Iesu, Louerd god, / thou me bohtest with thi blod; / out of this huerte orn the flod” (37-9). In “Spring Song on the Passion” (fol. 76, Brook #18), the speaker acknowledges the potential painfulness, specifically for the heart, of desiring Christ and identifying with his suffering in the lines “a suete loue-longynge / myne herte thurhout stong” (3-4), and “wel oht myne herte / for his loue to smerte” (18-19). On the other hand, the beneficial relationship between the penitent human heart and Christ’s suffering heart is made clear by the speaker in “Iesu, For Thi Muchele Miht” (fol. 79v, Brook #21):

In myn herte hit doth me god
 When y thence on Iesu blod,
 That rand down bi ys side
 From is herte down to is fot;
 For ous he spradde is herte blod.” (5-9)

In the following stanza, the speaker states that when he imagines “Iesu ded,” his “herte ouerwerpes” or is cast down, much like the old man’s (11-12). Thus, while the “An Old Man’s Prayer” does not explicitly address Christ’s passion, the speaker’s references to his breaking heart and pain-pierced sides can be read allegorically as an affective identification with Jesus’ suffering, so that “An Old Man’s Prayer” constitutes a poetic (as opposed to sacramental or liturgical) “*anamnesis*, a recalling of the significant events of the Redemption” (Gray 9). Unlike most passion lyrics, “An Old Man’s Prayer” does not provide the reader with an anonymous subjectivity which she can inhabit in order to identify with the suffering of Christ. Instead, the poem *depicts* a distinct persona experiencing what we may interpret in the light of Incarnational poetics as an affective

(i.e. physical and emotional) identification with Christ's sufferings.³⁰ The very specificity of the old man's persona bears Incarnational meaning: according to Milbank, "the particularity of Christ cannot displace our own particularity, because it includes true relations to every person through the actual linguistic processes of human history" (141). It is remarkable that the old man's Incarnational identification is realized through the physical signs of old age. Shahar points out that medieval images of God were universally depictions of the young, beautiful, virile Christ, which entailed a devaluation of the old body. However, the old man's identification with the sufferings of Christ through the sufferings of age also evokes the possibility of sharing Christ's physical glory, since the Passion and the Resurrection are inextricably linked in Christian teaching.

A more explicit instance of Incarnational identification may be seen in "The Poet's Repentance" (fol. 66, Brook #6). According to the speaker in this poem, due to Mary's central role in the incarnation of Christ, "wommon nes wicked non / seþþe he ybore was," in other words, no woman can be called wicked since the birth of Christ (23-4). The poet's tone here may be a bit tongue-in-cheek, but a serious theological point is made. Mary, as the second Eve, and Jesus, as the second Adam, redeem the totality of fallen human existence. Here, the identification is not so much affective as doctrinal. Milbank explains the poetic significance of this theological doctrine: "As the divine utterance, Jesus is the absolute origination of all meaning, but as human utterance Jesus is inheritor of all already constituted human meanings." Moreover, while the Old Testament

³⁰ Thus, "An Old Man's Prayer" is distinct from passion lyrics and more akin to narratives texts like *Piers Plowman* in which, according to Watson, Christ is "fictionally... incarnated *in*, not *as a result of*, the texts (113).

focus on the divine utterance of the Law excluded other images of God, “the poetic synthesis in Christ returns us to the figures, because he establishes them for the first time in total interrelation as the true human representation, the true human text” (136). Of course, it must be acknowledged that this poetic synthesis was not explicitly realized in the Christian thought of the Middle Ages. However, as Tristram notes, although “the imagination of the later Middle Ages may, to a large extent, be dominated by a *contemptus mundi*..., it is nevertheless true that nearly all the greatest poetry runs counter to this intention.” Tristram attributes this poetic resistance to the Incarnation, which “extends to all mankind the promise of ultimate unity” (61).³¹ The salvation provided by Christ is not merely a change of legal, moral status or an escape to some realm of transcendence utterly removed from the particularities of finite existence, but rather what Milbank calls the “realization of a particular integrity, whether individual or collective” (141).

The possibility of this unity is illustrated by the constant slippage and overlap between sacred and sensual desire throughout the Harley lyrics. As we have seen in “An Old Man’s Prayer,” the speaker’s desire for sexual enjoyment, social integration, physical strength, absolution, communion, reconciliation, all coexist and intermingle. The dual

³¹ Rhodes, citing James McEvoy, asserts that “unity, not transcendence... was always the goal of Grosseteste’s theology, and it is in the totality of human nature, not just the soul or reason that the fullest creaturely likeness to God is realized” (47). ‘Transcendence,’ for Rhodes, apparently means devaluing the material realm. More properly, ‘transcendence’ means going ‘across’ or ‘beyond’ the material, not necessarily leaving it behind. Thus, unity and transcendence are hardly mutually exclusive.

carnal/spiritual nature of “bote” has already been touched on. Mary’s healing ‘medicine’ exemplifies the same “coincidence between secular and sacred” (Woolf 129). The religious Harley poems often employ the same generic forms, *topoi*, and imagery as the secular lyrics.³² These similarities could be dismissed as didactically expedient appropriations of secular material, but this would be an unjustified aesthetic subordination of the religious lyrics to the secular. Moreover, the relationship between these categories is not a one-way street. In the love-lyric “Annot and John” (fol. 63, Brook #3), in the midst of an elaborate *blazon* of his beloved, the lover declares “bliþe yblessed of Crist, þat bayþeþ me mi bone / when derne dedis in day derne are done” (35-6). He is happily blessed by Christ, who grants him his request when secret deeds are secretly done in the day. Similarly, in “The Fair Maid of Ribblesdale” (fol. 66v, Brook #7), also largely constituted by an erotic *blazon*, the speaker ends with these lines: “He myhte sayen þat Crist hym seze / þat myhte nyhtes neh hyre leze / heuene he heuede here” (He that lies by her at night might say that Christ favors him, and he has heaven here) (82-4). While these lines might be interpreted as casual swearing or even deliberate irreverence, in the light of Incarnational poetics they can be seen as acknowledging that the person of Christ is the ground of all human joy, including sexual pleasure, whether

³² According to Christiania Whitehead, “there are odd occasions [in religious lyrics] when the appropriation of the terms of *fin amour* can threaten to get out of hand, leaving the reader uncertain whether contrast or continuation is implied (106). Stanbury sees such moments as indicating that medieval religious lyrics are capable of celebrating “desire even in its sexual form, as a powerfully transformative force, what Georges Bataille calls ‘sanctified transgression’” (231).

enjoyed in the licit context (i.e. marriage) or not. Christ's sacrificial passion appears unexpectedly in the context of yet another *blazon*: the speaker of "Blow, Northerne Wynd" prays fervently that "he þat reste im on þe rode / þat leflich lyf honoure" (he that hung on the cross / honor that lovely woman) (fol. 72v, Brook #14.20-21). Such slippage indicates that, rather than being identical in form but distinct in their objects, sacred and sensual desire are often nearly impossible to distinguish from one another. As Rhodes puts it, in medieval texts, "the erotic can be constitutive of the redemptive" (39). This is because the figure of Christ represents and enacts "the divine overtaking and fulfilling all human purposes" (Milbank 136).

Intimate and Incommensurable: Psychoanalysis vs. Theology

It would be difficult and ultimately undesirable to invoke the discourse of desire without considering the place of psychoanalytic criticism in medieval studies. While Aranye Fradenburg's *Sacrifice Your Love* is mostly concerned with Chaucerian texts, the book's introduction provides a useful framework for considering the relation of psychoanalysis to medieval studies in general, and so can illuminate possible points of connection and contrast between my primarily theological reading of "An Old Man's Prayer" and psychoanalytic interpretation. Fradenburg's central thesis is that desire is inherently "self-perpetuating," desiring "above all its own continuation not its fulfillment" (4-5). The lack or sacrifice of fulfillment is therefore an essential component of enjoyment. Thus, Fradenburg would likely interpret the speaker's remembrance in "An Old Man's Prayer" of his lost pleasures as a method of intensifying his penitential mode of enjoyment. Moreover, she explicitly resists attempts to reconcile "pleasure and duty," and so would likely take issue with the claim that the old man's prayer is essentially an expression of desire for the unity made possible by divine grace (4). Nonetheless, my reading of the old man's desire is fully consonant with Fradenburg's assertion that "full possession is impossible for mortal creatures" (5). Indeed, this is the perspective of Christian orthodoxy as expressed in the doctrine of the Fall. Humanity's essential lack means that the only hope of fulfillment lies in recovering transcendence. However, though Fradenburg does consider the relationship between psychoanalysis and theology at some length, she does so exclusively on her own Lacanian terms. The promise of ultimate reconciliation through the intervention of the divine Other is considered only as a fantasy of "unity and constancy" existing in the imaginary order and attempting to mask both the essential incompleteness of the symbolic realm of signifiers and the emptiness of the Real (5). In contrast, taking the theological perspective on its own terms enables us to

consider how the Other may be conceived of as reality, allowing for an arguably richer interpretive discourse.

The potential and limitations of psychoanalytic interpretation of medieval texts are illustrated by Fradenburg's identification of *contemptus mundi* with the death drive. The death drive is constituted by humanity's acknowledgement of the "trauma of aliveness," and by an implicit recognition of the truth in the claim of Silenus the satyr that the greatest good for humanity is "not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing" (16).³³ Fradenburg sees the *contemptus mundi* expressed by Innocent III in *On the Misery of the Human Condition* as essentially equivalent to the perspective of Silenus. In light of Fradenburg's insightful identification, "Le Regret de Maximian" may be seen as a poem dominated by the death drive: Maximian echoes precisely the sentiment of Silenus in claiming that it would have been better not to have been born at all. In contrast, though the death drive is present in "An Old Man's Prayer" ("stunt my lyfe a stounde"), it is ultimately overcome by the old man's faith in the power of Christ. However, Fradenburg's attempt to assimilate theology to psychoanalysis leads her to elide significant distinctions between the pagan perspective of Silenus and orthodox Christianity, in which the good for man is centered on the promise of everlasting life, sentience without end, which is exactly opposite to the satyr's claim that man's ultimate 'good' is non-existence. These tensions illustrate the need to take fuller account of the distinctive claims of theology in the process of interpreting medieval texts through the lens of psychoanalysis.

³³ In language remarkably reminiscent of the "godes" and "gomenes" of "An Old Man's Prayer," Fradenburg asserts that human subjects find the "order of goods" inevitably "disappointing" (16).

Fortunately, just this kind of ‘taking account’ can be seen in recent psychoanalytic approaches to medieval literature. As Mark Miller has it, the death drive is essentially the drive of desire “beyond signification” to the “emptiness or absence” of the Real. However, for medieval writers “the something beyond all objects that constitutes the target of desire’s drive—that is, the divine—is substantial (254). As Daniel Murtaugh points out in an essay on the relationship between Langland and Lacan, “more specifically, Lacan’s empty space is occupied by Christ, God in human form and in history.” While medieval theology and Lacanian psychoanalysis share a strong “structural resemblance,” they are very different in “content” (355-56). Because Fradenburg does not take sufficient account of this difference in content, her attempted fusion of horizons is lacking. Specifically, what she most fails to account for is the Incarnation.

While John Milbank does not explicitly address Lacanian claims in “Christological Poetics,” the essay nevertheless elucidates the considerations raised by Miller and Murtaugh. Like Fradenburg, Milbank acknowledges humanity’s inevitable alienation from its acts of meaning-making. Because our poetic acts and utterances, our formulations of significance, become external objects, “to *act at all* is to be dispossessed” (125). Something akin to the emptiness of the Lacanian Real appears in Milbank as the ‘bad infinite’: While the infinite distance between the “heze Louerd” of “An Old Man’s Prayer” and humanity intrinsically promises “endless human advancement,” the “sinful *inhibition* of poetic reception” means that humanity is lost in a futile search for an adequate *figura* of God and its relationship to him, which in turn would enable the proper response to the “bote” of divine grace (132). Thus the Old Testament chronicles a proliferation of images of the divine which only serves to emphasize the ultimate inadequacy of such images, the incompleteness of the symbolic order.

For Milbank, Christ is the proper *figura* of God and humanity, the ultimate ‘concrete universal’ who establishes a stable human *telos* and reinstates the promise of divine infinity for humankind:

It is as this divine-human person, who has both finitely and infinitely the character of a representation, that we finally recognize in Jesus the divine overtaking and fulfilling of all human purposes. As the divine utterance, Jesus is the absolute origination of all meaning, but as human utterance Jesus is the inheritor of all already constituted human meanings. He is a single utterance in his unified fulfillment of these meanings, such that he becomes the adequate metaphoric representation of the total human intent. (136)

Rather than doing away with the various partial images which preceded him, Christ substantiates their plenitude, “because he establishes them for the first time in total interrelation as the true human representation, the true human text.” (136).³⁴ Thus all human acts, utterances, and constructions of meaning find their realization and justification in the Incarnation. By extension, the various objects within the order of “godes” and “murpes” are substantiated by their relationship to the Incarnation. Furthermore, in his “woundes deope ant stronge” (Brook #18.35), Christ becomes a “broken sign” which incorporates the consequences of sin, death and suffering, and raises them into life. According to Milbank, by participating fully in historical human existence while remaining the fullness of the divine Word, Christ overcomes the deathly finitude of human signs and redeems the realm of human representation from its futility.

³⁴ Or, as Murtaugh puts it, Christ is “present to us, offering us a face like our own, in which we can anticipate, but *not* in a mirage, the maturation of our power” (255-56).

Of course, Fradenburg might dismiss Milbank's Incarnational theology as simply one among many sophisticated but ultimately inadequate "techniques of living" (17). This possibility reflects Fradenburg's that assertion that "psychoanalysis is incommensurable with religion, even if this incommensurability is part and parcel of a deep intimacy" (1995, 53). Despite the difficulties of integrating theological and psychoanalytic perspectives, their "deep intimacy" suggest the possibility of a fruitful critical conversation in which theology is an equal participant rather than merely an object of psychoanalytic appraisal. The challenge is compelling, since the opening lines of "An Old Man's Prayer" themselves unite the themes of memory, desire, and divine authorship of creation: "Heze Louerd, thou here my bone / that makes middelert ant mone, / ant mon of murthes munne" (1-3). In addition to presenting a powerful challenge to the dichotomy of morality and desire, these lines harmonize remarkably with the "psychoanalytic principle that it is desire that drives human subjectivity" (Fradenburg 2). In this essay I have tried to work against what Miller calls the

"strong tendency in modern engagements with medieval culture to imagine that that culture's theological commitments somehow foreclose the possibility of medieval subjects having a complicated relation to, or complex understandings of, desire." (255)

As Miller says, we should not "presume that we know what [these theological commitments] tell us about the life of desire or its conceptualization in medieval culture" (255). However, our critical engagements with medieval culture should be closely attuned to what Christian theology *can* and does tell us about desire.

This essay has argued for the possibility of a poetic synthesis which complicates the simple dichotomies of sacred and secular, transcendent and immanent, earthly and divine. In turn this argument itself is complicated by the discourse of desire as

approached through the critical methodology of psychoanalysis. However, this complication should be understood as critically stimulating rather than frustrating. If the voices of Fradenburg and Milbank, of psychoanalysis and Christological poetics, represent unresolved tensions in the foregoing analysis of “And Old Man’s Prayer” and other Harley lyrics, these critical pressures only serve to confirm the rich complexity of these poems and the manuscript in which they are found. Of course, the very uniqueness of Harley 2253 may be seen as undercutting its value as the basis for my project of critical and historical reevaluation, since the manuscript is hardly representative of the surviving literary material of its time, particularly in its abundant ‘secular’ poems. If the religious lyrics of the Harley Manuscript “represent byways in the history of the form” (Woolf 3), I believe that by thoroughly exploring such literary-historical byways, we may begin to discover, not only how we may have misunderstood, but how, as Fradenburg has it, “medieval cultures, like all others, may have misunderstood themselves” (78). This essay has been motivated by the conviction that that the discourse of contemporary theology is essential equipment for such exploration, and may indeed be a “bote” which is sorely needed in the critical analysis of medieval culture.

Appendix: “An Old Man’s Prayer.”

1 Heze Louerd, þou here my bone,
2 þat madest middelert ant mone,
3 ant mon of murþes munne.
4 Trusti kyng ant trewe in trone,
5 þat þou be wiþ me sahte sone,
6 asoyle me of sunne.
7 ffol ich wes in folies fayn,
8 in luthere lastes y am layn,
9 þat makeþ myn þryftes þunne,
10 þat semly sawes wes woned to seyn.
11 Nou is marred al my meyn,
12 away is al my wunne.

13 Vnwunne haueþ myn wonges wet,
14 þat makeþ me roupes rede.
15 Ne semy nout þer y am set,
16 þer me calleþ me fulle-flet
17 ant waynoun wayteglede.

18 Whil ich wes in wille wolde,
19 in vch a bour among þe bolde
20 yholde wiþ þe heste;
21 nou y may no fynger folde,
22 lutel loued ant lasse ytolde,
23 yleued wiþ þe leste.
24 A goute me haþ ygreyþed so
25 ant oþer eueles monye mo;
26 y not whet bote is beste.
27 Þar er wes wilde ase þe ro
28 nou y swyke, y mei nout so,
29 hit siweþ me so faste.

30 ffaste y wes on horse heh
31 ant werede worly wede;
32 nou is faren al my feh,
33 wiþ serewe þat ich hit euer seh,
34 a staf ys nou my stede.

35 When y se steden styþe in stalle
36 ant y go haltinde in þe halle,
37 myn huerte gynnep to helde.

38 Þat er wes wildest inwiþ walle
39 nou is vnder fote yfalle
40 ant mey no fynger felde.
41 Þer ich wes luef icham ful loht,
42 ant alle myn godes me atgoht,
43 myn gomenes waxeþ gelde.
44 Þat feyre founden me mete ant cloht,
45 hue wrieþ away as hue were wroht;
46 such is euel ant elde.

47 Euel ant elde ant oþer wo
48 foleweþ me so faste
49 me þunkeþ myn herte brekeþ atuo.
50 Sute God, whi shal hit swo?
51 Hou mai hit lengore laste?
52 Whil mi lif wes luper ant lees;
53 Glotonie mi glemon wes,
54 wiþ me he wonede a while;
55 Prude wes my plowe-fere,
56 Lecherie my lauendere;
57 wiþ hem is Gabbe ant Gyle.
58 Coueytise myn keyes bere,
59 Niþe ant Onde were mi fere,
60 þat bueþ folkes fyle;
61 Lyare wes mi latymer,
62 Sleuthe ant Slep mi bedyuer,
63 þat wenep me vmbe while.

64 Vmbe while y am to wene,
65 when y shal murþes meten.
66 Monne mest y am to mene;
67 Lord, þat hast me lyf to lene,
68 such lotes lef me leten.

69 Such lyf ich haue lad fol zore.
70 Merci, Louerd, y nul namore;
71 bowen ichulle to bete.
72 Syker hit siweþ me ful sore,
73 gabbes les ant luper lore;
74 sunnes bueþ vnsete.
75 Godes heste ne huld y noht,
76 bote euer azeyn is wille y wroht;
77 mon lereþ me to lete.
78 Such serewe haþ myn sides þurhsot

79 þat al y weolewe away to noht
80 when y shal murþes mete.

81 To mete murþes ich wes wel fous
82 ant comely mon ta calle
83 (y sugge by oþer ase bi ous)
84 alse ys hirmon halt in hous,
85 ase heued-hount in halle.

86 Dredful deþ, why wolt þou dare?
87 Bryng þis body þat is so bare
88 ant yn bale ybounde.
89 Careful mon ycast in care,
90 y falewe as flour ylet forþfare,
91 ychabbe myn deþes wounde.
92 Murþes helpeþ me no more;
93 help me, Lord, er þen ich hore,
94 ant stunt my lyf a stounde.
95 Þat 3okkyn haþ y 3yrned 3ore,
96 nou hit sereweþ him ful sore,
97 ant bringeþ him to grounde.

98 To grounde hit haueþ him ybroht;
99 whet ys þe beste bote
100 bote heryen him þat haht vs boht,
101 vre Lord þat al þis world haþ wroht,
102 ant fallen him to fote?

103 Nou icham to deþe ydyht,
104 ydon is al my dede.
105 God vs lene of ys lyht
106 þat we of sontes hebben syht
107 ant heuene to mede!

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